



## Gabon

### International Religious Freedom Report 2005

Released by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice.

There was no change in the status of respect for religious freedom during the period covered by this report, and government policy continued to contribute to the generally free practice of religion.

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom.

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights.

#### Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 103,347 square miles, and its population is approximately 1.5 million. Major religions practiced in the country include Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism), Islam, and traditional indigenous religions. Government statistics from 1993 indicate that approximately 60 percent of the country's citizens practice Christianity, almost 40 percent practice traditional indigenous religions, and 1 percent practice Islam. However, noncitizens, principally immigrants from Nigeria, Senegal, Mali, and Cameroon, constitute more than 20 percent of the population. As a result, Muslims make up a much larger proportion of the total population than previously reported, but no current statistics are available. The country's President is a member of the Muslim minority. Many persons practice both elements of Christianity and elements of traditional indigenous religions. It is estimated that approximately 73 percent of the total population, including noncitizens, practice at least some elements of Christianity; approximately 12 percent practice Islam (of which 80 to 90 percent are foreigners); approximately 10 percent practice traditional indigenous religions exclusively; and approximately 5 percent practice no religion or are atheists.

Foreign Christian missionaries are present and active in the country.

#### Section II. Status of Religious Freedom

##### Legal/Policy Framework

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. A 1970 decree banning Jehovah's Witnesses remained in effect; however, the Government did not enforce the ban.

The Ministry of the Interior maintains an official registry of some religious groups; however, it does not register small, indigenous religious groups. The Government does not require religious groups to register but recommends that they do so to receive full constitutional protection. No financial or tax benefit is conferred by registration; but religious groups are not taxed, can import duty-free items, and are exempted from land use and construction permit fees.

Islamic, Catholic, and Protestant denominations operate primary and secondary schools in the country. These schools are required to register with the Ministry of Education, which is charged with ensuring that these religious schools meet the same standards required for public schools. The Government does not contribute funds to private schools, whether religious or secular.

Both Catholic and Protestant radio stations broadcast in the country.

The Government promotes interfaith relations by facilitating meetings of leaders of the Roman Catholic Church hierarchy and the Islamic Council. Such meetings are held periodically, and informal discussions among religious leaders are routine.

The Government celebrates Christian and Muslim holidays as national holidays; these include Easter Sunday and Monday, Ascension Day, Assumption Day, All Saints' Day, Christmas, Eid al-Kebir, and Eid al-Fitr.

### **Restrictions on Religious Freedom**

The Government has refused to register approximately 10 religious groups, 9 of which were small, indigenous groups. A government decision on the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses has been pending for several years without resolution. In practice, the Government allows Jehovah's Witnesses to assemble and practice their religion. In addition, the Government has permitted Jehovah's Witnesses to proselytize.

The government television stations accorded free transmission time to the Catholic Church, some Protestant congregations, and Islamic mosques. Some Protestant denominations alleged that the government television station does not accord free airtime to minority religious groups. Protestants have at times also alleged that the armed forces favor Roman Catholics and Muslims in hiring and promotion. Some Protestant pastors complain that local officials discriminated against them by making it difficult to obtain building permits to construct churches, charging visa fees on volunteer medical and religious workers not imposed on other denominations, and demanding customs fees for aid materials.

There were no reports of religious prisoners or detainees.

### **Forced Religious Conversion**

There were no reports of forced religious conversion, including of minor U.S. citizens who had been abducted or illegally removed from the United States, or of the refusal to allow such citizens to be returned to the United States.

### **Abuses by Terrorist Organizations**

There were no reported abuses targeted at specific religions by terrorist organizations during the period covered by the report.

### **Section III. Societal Attitudes**

The generally amicable relationship among religions in society contributed to religious freedom. There were no reports of interreligious violence or intrareligious incidents during the period covered by this report.

Practitioners of some traditional indigenous religions inflicted bodily harm on other persons in 2005. Two adolescent boys found murdered in February are widely believed to have been the victims of ritual killings. No information has been made public on the investigation, if any, into the circumstances of the crime or possible suspects. The Ministry of the Interior has stated in the past that violence and bodily harm to others in the practice of a traditional religion is a criminal offense and is prosecuted vigorously; however, no information about such prosecutions or their results was available.

### **Section IV. U.S. Government Policy**

The U.S. Government discusses religious freedom issues with the Government as part of its overall policy to promote human rights. U.S. Embassy officials meet regularly with leaders of the Catholic Church, the Islamic Superior Council, and Protestant churches. Contacts are maintained with the Ministry of Interior and the Minister of Human Rights to discuss the general state of religion in the country. The Embassy also maintains close contacts with various Christian missionary groups in the country.

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[International Religious Freedom Report Home Page](http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2005/51473.htm)